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Letters

Separating 'Spies' From Peace Corps

Your editorial, "The ACTION Nominee" (April-22), misses the point. Twice.

You note that Thomas W. Pauken, President Reagan's nominee to head ACTION — the parent agency for the Peace Corps — was an Army officer in Vietnam "whose military specialty was intelligence." You point out that "there is fear that the Peace Corps could be compromised by having as its head a person with an intelligence background." And you grant that "the concern is legitimate" that "there must be not even a tenuous connection between Peace Corps activities and U.S. intelligence-gathering activities."

Yet, surprisingly, you never explain why this "legitimate" concern exists.

Your own Mary McGrory supplied the answer only a week earlier. She wrote that Peace Corps volunteers "have labored from the beginning under the shadow of suspicion that under the guise of digging sewers, teaching English and planting fields, they were doing the work of the CIA."

It is widely feared, by present and former volunteers, that the appointment of a former intelligence officer to direct the Peace Corps would appear to confirm officially the accusations of our enemies and adversaries in the Third World, and the suspicions even of our friends, that the Corps is nothing but a front organization for American spies. Once that wall of separation between spying and the Corps is

breached, to quote Ms. McGrory again, "the health and safety of the volunteers" could be imperiled.

Or, as Robert M. McNamara Jr. stated in a letter to Congress as general counsel for the Peace Corps, "the primary reason for this dichotomy is the heightened concern for the safety and security of the volunteers and staff overseas, especially in countries where even the suspicion — albeit totally unfounded — of participation

"... Our concern ... has increased in recent years as terrorist and guerrilla organizations have looked upon hostage-taking as a standard operating procedure to effect short-term domestic and international political gains. The possibility and the fear that our volunteers or staff could be used as pawns in such a situation is not speculative. In recent times two of our volunteers have been held hostage: one for three years and another for 10 days."

"Consequently, since most of our volunteers operate outside of capital cities, oftentimes at great distances in rural villages, the Peace Corps has strictly applied the intelligence policy."

Mr. McNamara noted that the Peace Corps policy of keeping intelligence activities at arm's length should bar Mr. Pauken from any "Washington policy position" with the Corps — which, of course, he would have as head of ACTION.

You miss a second point, too, when you conclude that "it strikes us as strained to think that a stint in military intelligence could be construed as violating the traditional separation of the Peace Corps and intelligence-gathering."

"Construed" by whom? By me? I don't for a moment believe Mr. Pauken will convert the Peace Corps into an arm of the CIA. But what I believe — or what you believe — doesn't matter. What matters is how Mr. Pauken's appointment may be perceived by the inhabitants of the mountains of Nepal or of the barrios of Colombia or of isolated areas of Sierra Leone or of any of the scores of remote places around the world where Corps volunteers live and work in almost total physical dependence on the goodwill of largely rural, unsophisticated people.

How will they "construe" Mr. Pauken's appointment? That's the point. I very much doubt that they will trouble themselves over subtle distinctions between "basic military work" and CIA-type espionage, for example. To them, I fear, intelligence is intelligence and intelligence is spying. And they will want none of it, or of the people they believe are doing it.

That is solely why I oppose Mr. Pauken's confirmation and a major reason why I have introduced legislation to separate the Peace Corps from ACTION.

and "bitter dispute," there is certainly no rancor or bitterness on my part. I have nothing personal against Mr. Pauken. It's unfortunate that President Reagan chose him for this rather than any number of other posts for which he may be better qualified. But that was the president's prerogative. He has his responsibility; I have mine.

I have stated publicly that I would offer no objection to Mr. Pauken's nomination as director of ACTION if the Peace Corps is separated from the agency. That is still my position.

Protecting the lives of Americans abroad — not ridiculous diversionary charges that those who oppose the Pauken nomination are anti-soldier or anti-Vietnam veteran or anti-intelligence or even anti-Pauken — is the only issue here.

Alan Cranston,
U.S. Senate,
Washington, D.C.

For the sake of our present and potential future Peace Corps volunteers all over the world and their families, as well as for the Peace Corps itself, I deeply regretted your April 22 editorial on the ACTION nominee.

As a former member of the Congress from Oregon I must share the blame for the present unfortunate situation. It was the Congress that, at the time of Mr. Nixon's presidency, saw fit to take some domestic volunteer programs and couple them with the Peace Corps in the new agency called ACTION. However much those programs look alike on the surface, below the surface they are very considerably different and I think that experience has demonstrated that the attempt to combine all these programs in a single agency was a legislative error.

During my two years as director of the Peace Corps during Mr. Ford's presidency we gave high priority to making as absolutely certain as we could that there existed neither fact nor impression of any connection between the Peace Corps and any intelligence service of the government. Our first reason was to keep our volunteers safe from any counter-intelligence operations in any foreign country. Our second reason was to maximize their effectiveness as communicators between our country and the land in which they